

Why the war in Syria could be making Hezbollah stronger

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) When Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah publicly confirmed in May 2013 that Hezbollah had intervened in Syria's bloody civil war, the Iran-backed Shi'ite militant group was locked in a battle that resulted in its highest-ever casualty rate.

Hezbollah's assault on the rebel-held town of Qusayr, near Homs, its first serious engagement of the Syria conflict, saw dozens of fighters killed in just 17 days of grueling street-to-street fighting.

The high casualties and the impact of multiple funerals across Shi'ite regions of Lebanon led some to predict that in coming to the aid of its ally, embattled Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, Hezbollah had entered its "Vietnam"—an exhausting conflict with no clear exit strategy that would erode its popular standing across the Middle East as a powerful foe of Israel.

"The battle in Qusayr will act as Hezbollah's Vietnam and it will have repercussions on the whole of Lebanon," Michel Mouawad, a Lebanese Christian politician who opposes Hezbollah, said at the time.

Yet, nearly two years later, those predictions have not been borne out. In fact, despite incurring high casualties and the wrath of the region's Sunnis, Hezbollah has acquired a set of new fighting skills in Syria. While ensuring President Assad's continued survival, a generation of fresh recruits has been bloodied in battle, potentially making the organization a greater threat to arch enemy Israel in any future encounter.

Even domestic criticism over Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has dulled of late, partly in reaction to the rise of extremist Sunni groups like the self-described Islamic State, whose rampages across Iraq and Syria and video-taped atrocities send a collective chill through Lebanon's religious minorities.

“When you refer to Vietnam it means being stuck in a quagmire,” said Michael Young, a Lebanese political analyst. “It’s a grinding fight, no doubt about it, but it’s not quite a quagmire” for Hezbollah.

### **Syria's strategic value**

Syria is the geopolitical lynchpin that connects Hezbollah to its ideological and logistical patron, Iran, providing strategic depth for its struggle against Israel. It is also a conduit for the flow of weaponry to Hezbollah’s arsenal. The fall of Assad would likely disrupt the regional alliance known as the “axis of resistance,” grouping Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and other militant organizations that oppose Israel and Western policies in the Middle East.

Hezbollah leader “Nasrallah made it clear [in 2013] that preserving the regime and its axis of resistance was strategic [and] vital for Hezbollah,” said Jeffrey White, defense fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. “This definition of the situation and its stakes produced the commitment, and will likely preserve it despite the costs. . . . The difference between this and Vietnam is that [Syria] really is strategic . . . for Hezbollah.”

There are estimated to be at least 5,000 Hezbollah fighters operating in Syria at any one time. They spearhead battles across the country from Hasake in the northeast, to Aleppo in the north, Latakia in the northwest, Damascus and its suburbs, and Deraa in the south.

For now, Hezbollah and its allies have the upper hand in Syria. The moderate rebel Free Syrian Army is withering in the face of dwindling foreign support and the onslaught of the Assad regime and extremist groups like IS. And the international community has shifted from debating whether Assad should be toppled to fretting about the IS threat.

### **A steep price**

Still, Hezbollah has paid a steep price. Since sending the first combatants into Syria in the summer of 2012, perhaps a little over 1,000 fighters have been killed. To put that figure into context, in nearly three years, its casualties in Syria approaching that of Hezbollah’s official tally of 1,284 killed battling Israel’s occupation of south Lebanon between 1982 and 2000.

Nasrallah was once hailed in regional polls as the most admired leader in the Arab world. Today he is reviled by most Sunnis and his party dubbed “Hizbu Shaitan,” the “Party of the Devil,” a play on the organization’s name which means the “Party of God.”

“Too much blood has been spilled, too many lives have been lost, too much mistrust has set in, and it is going to be very hard for Hezbollah to rehabilitate its image among the majority of the Syrian Sunni street,” said Randa Slim, a Hezbollah expert at the Middle East Institute in Washington.

And there is little indication that Iran, which has taken control of the struggle to preserve the Assad regime, is willing to offer any fig leaf to the Syrian opposition that could salvage ruptured Sunni-Shi'ite ties. On the contrary, in recent months, Iran has doubled down on its commitment to Assad, building numerous Syrian “Hezbollah-style” militias and deploying Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) and Shi'ite militias from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

### **Key support for Iran's gains**

“Iranian military commanders liberated 85 percent of Syrian territory previously controlled by the opposition, at a time when Assad had accepted defeat,” Hussein Hamdani, a top IRGC general, told Iran’s Rasa news agency this week.

Iranian officials have acknowledged the vital role Hezbollah has played in allowing the Islamic Republic to exert new levels of influence across Syria as well as other flashpoints in the Middle East such as Iraq, Yemen, and Gaza.

“That is a huge advance for them [the Iranians]. It’s gigantic. Can you imagine them having that much control in Syria a few years ago before this crisis happened?” said Phillip Smyth, a researcher at the University of Maryland and author of the Hizballah Cavalcade blog, which focuses on Shi'ite militarism in the Middle East.

There is a certain irony in associating Hezbollah with a Vietnam-style morass. In the late 1990s, the Vietnam analogy was applied to Israel’s occupation of a border strip in southern Lebanon. Israeli troops came under attack almost daily from lightly-armed Hezbollah fighters, and finally pulled out in May 2000.

Still, such comparisons with Vietnam were perhaps as misleading then for Israel as they are today for Hezbollah. Washington lies 8,300 miles from Hanoi, but Israeli officials used to point out that Shi'ite Hezbollah-supporting villages in south Lebanon lie less than a mile from Israeli border communities.

### **Support from Shi'ite base**

Nasrallah has used the same argument of the enemy's proximity to justify Hezbollah's intervention in Syria.

"If those [extremist Sunni] groups manage to specifically control the [areas] adjacent to the Lebanese border, then they will pose a threat to the Lebanese, both Muslims and Christians," he said in his May 2013 speech.

That argument has helped Hezbollah maintain the support of its Shi'ite base for its Syria gambit, despite the backlash last year of multiple suicide bombings in Shi'ite-populated areas of Lebanon that left dozens dead and hundreds wounded. Even some Christians have muted their criticism of Hezbollah, viewing the threat posed by IS, which has a stronghold on Lebanon's northeast border, as worse than the repercussions of Hezbollah's intervention in Syria.

In Shi'ite villages in southern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley, brightly-colored "martyr" portraits of those slain in the Syria war hang alongside their sun-faded counterparts from earlier battles against Israel. For Hezbollah members, there is no difference between the enemy they once fought in south Lebanon and the forces they confront today in Syria.

"We consider the fight against the Takfiris as the same as against the Israelis," said the mayor of a village in south Lebanon, who is a Hezbollah member. The term *Takfiri* is used to describe extremist Sunnis who view as apostates all those that do not share their literal interpretation of Islam. "Syria is not a Vietnam for us. Israel is backing the Takfiris to try and weaken us, but in fact they are making us stronger."

### **Israel has taken notice**

Certainly, Hezbollah has expanded its martial skills in Syria, learning to fight in a broad variety of environments from desolate mountains to arable landscapes and dense inner-city neighborhoods. And Hezbollah's battlefield gains have not gone

unnoticed in Israel.

Hezbollah commanders “are learning about controlling fighters, coordinating intelligence, firepower, and command and control. This is a serious development that requires us to prepare accordingly,” an anonymous Israeli army officer was widely quoted in the Israeli media as saying last September.

Abu Ali, a veteran Hezbollah fighter, who has served multiple tours in Syria, reckoned that the organization’s involvement in Syria has made it stronger.

“After Qusayr, it doesn’t matter where we are sent,” he said, speaking on the eve of a new deployment to Syria. “We are trained for everything.”

Still, Abu Ali did not expect the conflict to end anytime soon.

“It will go on for several more years,” he said. “But that is not a problem for us because we are winning.”